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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HELSINKI 000242

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SUBJECT: FINLAND: POLITICAL PARTY CONSENSUS BREAKS ON NATO
POLICY

REF: A. 09 HELSINKI 79

[1](#)B. 09 HELSINKI 127

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael A. Butler for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. With opposition parties rejecting the Government's defense and security white paper on June 16, Finland saw a highly unusual break in its traditional "grand political consensus" on foreign and security policy. Opposition and governing coalition parties blamed each other for the broken consensus, which had at its base a disagreement on Finland's possible NATO membership. Having quietly walked together up to NATO's doorstep, Finland's political parties are unable to reach a consensus on the crucial next action: to walk through the door or not. Opposition parties seek to stop what they see as an inexorable move towards membership; they also may seek to exploit public opposition to membership and reverse successive electoral losses by making the next elections a referendum on NATO. The main parties in the governing coalition lack internal unity on the question of NATO membership, but have ample time before the next parliamentary and presidential elections to craft positions. As the parties assess the fallout from the broken consensus, the Embassy will continue to contribute to a fact-based public debate about NATO that stresses its long-standing and continuing contributions to European security, its consensus decision making, and its cooperation with the EU. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION REJECTS DEFENSE WHITE PAPER

[1](#)2. (C) On June 16 the Finnish Parliament approved the Government's quadrennial defense and security white paper (REFS A and B). In a highly unusual move, within the Foreign Affairs Committee and in the plenary session opposition parties complained about the paper's treatment of Finland's possible NATO membership and its formula for defense spending increases, and voted nearly unanimously against the paper. (NOTE: The populist True Finns (TF) party provided the only opposition support for the paper. In a March meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, TF leader Timo Soini said that regardless of his party's disagreement with the governing coalition - e.g., regarding NATO membership - the TF supports a single Finnish voice on security matters. END NOTE.) The opposition's move was highly unusual because traditionally Finland's foreign and security policies follow a broad political consensus that includes the governing coalition and opposition parties. Though drafted by the Government, the white paper should reflect that consensus, and support for it in the Parliament should encompass all political parties.

FINGER POINTING OVER LOST CONSENSUS

13. (SBU) The opposition and governing coalition parties pointed at each other for the failed consensus. Opposition parties complained that the white paper's points departed from an earlier cross-party consensus reflected in a 2008 security report by group of parliamentarians; that report referred to "cooperation" with NATO, not the white paper's "strong case" for membership. In the June 16 plenary session a parliamentarian for the leading opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) said that in the absence of a consensus Finland's security policy would reflect "small-scale politics" and would not be coherent or trustworthy. Members of the governing coalition denied that the 2008 security report reflected a political consensus, and therefore the opposition parties made the historical move of breaking consensus in voting against the white paper.

OPPOSITION SPIES ELECTION ISSUE?

14. (C) In a June 16 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, Olli-Pekka Jalonen, Counselor to the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, described the SDP's action as particularly unusual. By rejecting the white paper the SDP implicitly criticized President Halonen, who has ruled out pursuing NATO membership during her term but nevertheless approved the white paper's more positive language regarding NATO membership. (NOTE: The popular Halonen came up through the SDP ranks, but as President is formally unaffiliated. END NOTE.) Eyeing the SDP's difficulties in finding a message, and its dwindling support over the last few election cycles, Jalonen suspects the SDP is considering making NATO membership a prominent issues in the next parliamentary elections (2011).

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GOVERNING PARTIES DON'T WANT SPOTLIGHT ON NATO?

15. (C) The two main parties in the governing coalition would not necessarily welcome a spotlight on NATO in the next elections. Publicly, Prime Minister Vanhanen dismissed the opposition's claim that his government broke the consensus, and emphasized that the white paper did not depart from the existing policy that "the NATO option remains and Finland does not close the window of opportunity" for membership. Privately, the Prime Minister had difficulty maintaining a consensus within his own Center Party (CP) regarding the white paper. CP parliamentary staff told Pol/Econ Chief that some CP parliamentarians needed reminders that their party supported (and the Prime Minister approved) the "strong case" language on NATO. Jalonen complained that the Defense Committee Chair, Juha Korkeaoja (CP), barged into a Foreign Affairs Committee meeting and spoke about the NATO language "like a member of the opposition." The CP remains deeply divided on the question of Finland's NATO membership.

16. (SBU) The National Coalition Party (NCP), which leads in national opinion polls, is the party most supportive of trans-atlantic links, and NCP-member Foreign Minister Stubb is an unabashed NATO supporter (while also supporting a strong role for the EU in Finland's foreign and security policy). However, with popular support for NATO membership at 27 percent and opposition over 50 percent, NCP members might not wish to be painted as simply the "pro-NATO" party in an election. The NCP also lacks unanimity on NATO membership: current presidential-poll frontrunner Sauli Niinisto recently expressed doubts in public about a Finnish NATO membership application. Not surprisingly, then, in parliamentary debate over the white paper Stubb stressed that Finnish security has three main elements - the EU, NATO and Nordic Defense Cooperation - and that all are important and not rivals.

COMMENT

17. (C) Having found the means to quietly move together up to NATO's doorstep, Finland's political parties may have reached

a point where the next action will not be based on a broad political consensus: to walk through the door or not. Wishing to stop what it sees as an inexorable move over the threshold, opponents of membership appear willing to risk public ire about the lost foreign/security policy consensus in order to exploit public doubts about NATO (and reverse successive electoral losses). The CP and NCP can wrap themselves in the current "maintain the NATO option" policy while they assess the public reaction to the breakdown in consensus, and also defer decisions (and internal debates) about how to address NATO membership in the next parliamentary and presidential elections. As the parties consider their options, the Embassy will continue to contribute to a fact-based public debate about NATO that stresses its long-standing and continuing contributions to European security, its consensus decision making, and its cooperation with the EU. END COMMENT.

BUTLER